

BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Grant, Catherine (2015) Interplay: (Re)finding and (Re)framing cinematic experience, film space, and the child's world. LOLA 6 ,

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/20942/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>
contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

or alternatively

Interplay: (Re)Finding and (Re)Framing Cinematic Experience, Film Space, and the Child's World

Catherine Grant

Through the first gate,
Into our first world, shall we follow [...]?
– T.S. Eliot (1)

[I]f play is neither inside nor outside, where is it?
– D.W. Winnicott (2)

There is a state of mind in which things are found. It is an experience of finding something that already exists, but which had not yet been discovered.
– Claire Pajaczkowska (3)

[T]he more recognition there is of the dependence of one's own involvement with the work of others, both individually and as a field of work, the more there is something to be found and used in its turn.
– Lesley Caldwell (4)

My video *Interplay*, which began as a kind of audiovisual doodle, ended up as a free adaptation of an evolving thread in the film theoretical writing of Annette Kuhn, the scholar to whom it pays warm tribute. (5) This thread, which touches on cinematic experience, film space, and the world of the child, extends over more than twenty years in Kuhn's work (coincidentally, the period of time in which I have been fortunate to know her). It weaves its way through a moving exploration of her childhood experience of Alexander Mackendrick's *Mandy* (1952), (6) her various discussions of child characters, play and cinematic space in *My Ain Folk* (Bill Douglas, 1973), *Ratcatcher* (Lynne Ramsay, 1999), *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (Terence Davies, 1988) and *Where is the Friend's Home?* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1987), (7) through to chapters by her in her groundbreaking edited collection *Little Madnesses: Winnicott, Transitional Phenomena and Cultural Experience* (2013). (8) The direct citation from one of these works at the end of the video, which firmly anchors *Interplay* in the world of Kuhn's scholarship, runs the worthwhile risk of tautology, offering a retrospective epigraph that reframes, or crystallises in verbal discourse, all that has preceded it.

As the title of this recent book indicates, over the years Kuhn's work has increasingly taken up and reworked, for film and media studies, insights about child development and the world of play from the writings of D.W. Winnicott, the English pediatrician and psychoanalyst who was especially influential in the field of object relations theory. (9) In this branch of psychoanalytic theory, following Winnicott, 'objects' can be physical and/or virtual, internal-external entities to which we relate: usually, 'persons, parts of persons, or symbols of one of these'. (10) Perhaps the best-known example of this kind of relation is the one we have with 'transitional objects', as they are called by Winnicott, comforting physical objects (customarily, soft toys or blankets) that enable us as very young children to transition into an increasing separation from our mothers, or primary carers. (11) As Robert M. Young has argued of Winnicott's notion, (transitional) objects develop into 'a transitional [or "potential"] space "that is intermediate between the dream and the reality, that which is called cultural life"'. (12) An object relations framework, then, as Lavinia Gomez writes,

places the human being in a dual world of external and internal relationship. Each of these worlds affects the other. Our inner world is a changing dynamic process, with some more fixed and some more fluid patterns, both conscious and unconscious. These dynamics influence how we experience external reality and are also themselves influenced by our experience of external reality [...]. (13)

Like Winnicott, Kuhn's research in this field began with the urge to listen to a child. In her case, the child was herself, as a seven-year old, watching *Mandy*, a melodrama about a congenitally deaf girl ('Mandy', played by Mandy Miller) of the same age who, in the course of the film, learns to speak, and begins to overcome her painful isolation. Kuhn writes (both of herself, metaphorically, as well as Mandy),

1. T.S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton' (1936).

2. D.W. Winnicott, 'The Location of Cultural Experience', in *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971). Italics in the original.

3. Claire Pajaczkowska, 'On Humming: Reflections on Marion Milner's Contribution to Psychoanalysis', in Lesley Caldwell (ed.), *Winnicott and the Psychoanalytic Tradition: Interpretation and Other Psychoanalytic Issues* (London: Karnac Books, 2007), p. 33.

4. Lesley Caldwell, 'Introduction', in Caldwell (ed.), *Art, Creativity, Living* (London: Karnac Books, 2000), p. 7.

5. *Interplay* was first screened at an event at which Kuhn was appointed as Emeritus Professor in Film Studies at Queen Mary University of London: "Pictures, Places and Living Memory, with Annette Kuhn," London, 13 June, 2015. Thanks to Guy Westwell for making the screening possible. Thanks also to Hoi Lun Law and Chiara Grizzaffi for their insightful comments about *Interplay*.

6. Annette Kuhn, '*Mandy* and Possibility,' *Screen* 33.3 (1992).

7. *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso, 1995/2002); *Ratcatcher* (London: BFI, 2008); 'Thresholds: Film as Film and the Aesthetic Experience', *Screen* 46.4 (2005); and 'Cinematic Experience, Film Space, and the Child's World', *Canadian Journal of Film Studies / Revue Canadienne D'études Cinématographiques* 19.2, Fall (2010).

8. Annette Kuhn (ed), *Little Madnesses: Winnicott, Transitional Phenomena and Cultural Experience* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

9. Including, interestingly, Kuhn's discussion of the role of doodles, or

The little girl wants to be heard, and children ask the hardest questions of all. The adult cannot pretend to offer all, or indeed perhaps any, of the right answers to the big questions the child's insistent interruptions pose for cultural theory and for film theory. But she can at least listen to what the little girl has to say. (14)

My (at once infantile and scholarly) messing around with audiovisual material from a number of the films Kuhn had written about began with this quotation. It had stuck in my head. I wondered what had happened to Miller after she had made *Mandy*, so I started to search for information and found a YouTube upload of an old gramophone recording of Miller singing the theme song from *Child in the House*, a 1956 British drama film directed by Cy Endfield, in which she appears as a (slightly older) child character struggling to cope with uncaring relatives. (15) I began to compose the video by using this recording as an auditory frame for the images. In this way, the voice of the (earlier mute) child becomes *acousmatic*, paradoxically reframed as a somewhat maternal, and certainly comforting, container for the images of often troubled and uncommunicative children haunting the original film footage.

The video focuses, as does Kuhn to an extent across her work on these films, on images of children daring to play, eventually letting themselves loose in the psychically risky (if uncontained) territory that Winnicott conceived of as potential space. They finally manage to inhabit *actively*, creatively, 'the metaphorical boundary that divides internal from external, that either/or in which the object has traditionally been entrapped' (André Green). (16)

In her work on cinema, Kuhn frequently focuses on the ways in which 'the moving image releases objects in the frame from imprisonment within themselves.' (17) It is this aspect of her writing – this matter of kinetic release – that, together with the facticity of the audiovisual material from the films themselves, compelled the most engaging comparative aspect of my video: the focus in its second half on the moving double-framings that abound in all these (and other) films about children and play, framings which indeed work cinematically to contain, enable and release the 'children's mobilities' in these films, and connect these to (similarly contained, enabled and released) acts of spectating. (18) As we watch the children play we, too, move back and forth through these frames.

Phyllis Creme, author of a remarkable 1994 PhD thesis on the notion of the 'Playing Spectator' (which reached similar conclusions to Kuhn's own enthralling discovery that 'the secret of cinephilia' is that 'Cinema can be, or be like, a transitional phenomenon'), (19) argued that:

The playing spectator's wish to take a part in the film-play activates a psychic movement into the space of the action on screen. [...]his move is effected through the interaction of the film's spatial operations and the spectator's psychic shift into her 'potential space', the psychic area that Winnicott posits as the location for cultural experience. To put it the other way round, she internalises the film space — the combination of space and movement — and the film 'enters' her psyche. The process of luring and allurements of the spectator into the film is therefore one of activating her wishes, even longings, to be 'there', on screen, playing her part; the screen space makes available to her a playspace and, conversely, her ability to make use of her own potential space enables her to engage with the film and take up her place in it. (20)

These words transport me back to *Mandy*, and to Kuhn's powerful reminiscence on it. The little girl and the adult film theorist have (re)found their space, as well as their voices, together inside and outside the frame of the screen. Reworking (or *replaying*) all of these elements through my video *Interplay* helped me to (re)discover, from the inside, as well as the outside, that one of Kuhn's most important contributions to film studies in her substantial *and moving* work on children, cinema and object relations theory is the potential space it has offered up for a deeply fruitful encounter between psychoanalysis, affect and memory studies, and a new kind of *transitional phenomenology*. Together with the work of Creme and other object-relations film and media theorists, Kuhn's writings can help us move outside of the frameworks of scopophilia and voyeurism, and other (post-Freudian), mostly ocular-centric approaches to cinephilic pleasures and attachments. In their careful attention to time-based, conscious and unconscious, inside/outside interactions of cinematic spatiality, mobility, framing, proprioception, memory *and* play, they have opened up the possibility of a truly *psychodynamic*, not quite so narrowly psychoanalytic, approach to the study of the 'everyday magic' of the cinema and of our cultural experience of it. (21)

from [Issue 6: Distances](#)

squiggles, and string or thread in Winnicott's analytic practice and theory: Kuhn, *Little Madnesses*, pp. 13-14.

10. Victor Daniels, '[Object Relations Theory](#)', Website.

11. D.W. Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena – A Study of the First Not-Me Possession', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, No. 34, (1953), pp. 89-97.

12. Robert M. Young, '[Potential Space: Transitional Phenomena](#)', op. cit. Citing D.W. Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (London: Hogarth, 1965), p. 150.

13. Lavinia Gomez, *An Introduction to Object Relations* (London, Free Association Books, 1997), p. 2.

14. Kuhn, '*Mandy* and Possibility', p. 237.

15. Online [here](#). Last accessed 24 August, 2015.

16. André Green, 'Potential Space in Psychoanalysis: The Object in the Setting', in Simon A Grolnick and Leonard Barkin (eds), *Between Reality and Fantasy: Winnicott's Concepts of Transitional Objects and Phenomena* (Northvale, N.J./London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1978), p. 177.

17. Annette Kuhn, 'Cultural Experience and the Gallery Film', in Kuhn (ed), *Little Madnesses*, 167. Kuhn paraphrases Marion Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint* (London: Heinemann, 2nd Ed., 1971), p.16.

18. Kuhn, *Little Madnesses*, p.17.

19. Kuhn, 'Thresholds: Film as Film and the Aesthetic Experience,' p. 414.

20. Phyllis Creme, *The Playing Spectator: A Study on the Applicability of the Theories of D.W. Winnicott to Contemporary Concepts of the Viewer's Relationship to Film*, PhD Thesis, University of Kent, 1994, Chapter 2, p. 13. See also Creme's chapter 'The Playing Spectator' in Kuhn (ed.), *Little Madnesses*, pp. 39-52.

21. The title of Annette Kuhn's 2002 book: *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002).

© Catherine Grant and LOLA, December 2015.
Cannot be reprinted without permission of the author and editors.

[HOME](#)

[CURRENT ISSUE](#)